

# Report on the European Ayahuasca Research Symposium

Researcher Workgroup, Amsterdam, 18 June 2011

Prepared by the

**Hungarian Multidisciplinary Society for Psychedelic Studies**

In April 2011, over 300 people convened at the University of Amsterdam to attend the European Ayahuasca Research Symposium (<http://www.stichtingopen.nl/ears/>), a half-day seminar co-sponsored by Stichting OPEN and MAPS. The Symposium brought together researchers from across Europe who over the last few years have been studying ayahuasca and DMT within the disciplines of anthropology, neuroscience, psychology and religious studies. The next morning, the presenters from the seminar were joined by other European ayahuasca scholars for a closed-door researcher workgroup intended to stimulate future ayahuasca research and possible collaborations in Europe. The workgroup succeeded in building a shared knowledge base of ongoing and planned ayahuasca research, in facilitating discussions on methodology and obtaining institutional approvals for research, and in developing personal and professional contacts among the few ayahuasca researchers currently based in Europe. This short report shares some of the highlights of the workgroup.

Participants included:

- Bia Labate, Ph.D. (BR)
- Prof. Dr. Wouter Hanegraaff (NL)
- Brian Anderson, MD/MSc cand. (USA)
- Joost Breeksema, MA (NL)
- Prof Dr. Ede Frecska (HUN)
- Petra Bokor, MSc (HUN)
- David Bartha, MA (HUN)
- Rama Leclerc, Ph.D. (FR)
- Janine Schmid, Ph.D. (DE)
- Jörg Daumann, Ph.D. (DE)
- Christian Rättsch, Ph.D. (DE)
- Claudia Müller-Ebeling, Ph.D. (DE)
- Arno Adelaars (NL)
- Danny Diskin, MSc (UK)
- Diana Trimble, MLA (UK)

## ***Introductions***

The workgroup started with a short introduction of the participants. In a brief summary, everyone delineated their prior work regarding ayahuasca and their plans and interests for future research. The participants not presenting on the previous day at the conference at the University of Amsterdam

were asked to introduce their scientific work with ayahuasca in more detail during 15 minute presentations.

*A short summary of the presentations:*

**Danny Diskin:** *Tribal technology and scientific superstition regarding ayahuasca: Historical perspectives on the scientific study of non-scientific technique.*

To make the way for his main point, Danny first used the example of the 19th century medical era when the establishment first met the data on mesmerism and Chinese medicine. He pointed out how many things are missed by science by using his own theoretical prejudices. His main point was that - as Foucault says - “an epistemic object cannot be analysed outside of its cultural matrix”. But this is exactly what is happening when ayahuasca is analysed in the lab, outside of its traditional, cultural, ritual matrix.

In the lab the purity of the drug used for the analysis is of high importance as opposed to the shamanic use of ayahuasca, where the purity of the person giving the drug is important. Another problem with psychological studies using ayahuasca concerns the sharing of the experiences. For practitioners in the jungle it is important to keep their experiences intimate whereas for scientific studies we need the experiences for the analysis. We use statistical methods to normalise the data, however in the jungle “not-normal data” is what counts as interesting. Statistical significance and personal significance are therefore two different things. How can we translate between these two?

His final point was that the values offered by the scientific perspective are not universal values. Therefore we have to aim for open-minded transdisciplinary studies incorporating native, shamanic perspectives in order to avoid the mistakes of the past.

**Diana Trimble:** *Faith and Reason in the Battle for Decriminalization*

Diana’s presentation hit a very personal tone by starting with an experience from her past involving psychedelics and the police, who found a small amount of psilocybin mushrooms in her home at the time when she had a medical exemption under California law for cannabis. Being a former adherent of the “Religious Freedom Defense”—during her time with the Santo Daime church, which was also the subject of her 2002 master’s thesis *Liquid Light of the Santo Daime: Plant Medicines and their Potential for Personal and Cultural Transformation Via Direct Experience of the Divine*—her experience with the police convinced her that special exemptions such as religious use are not applicable in our times; furthermore, they may even be contrary to the very wisdoms afforded by psychedelics. She stressed the importance of what is now being termed “cognitive liberty”, a philosophical position that encourages a very fundamental questioning and rethinking of the laws currently controlling psychotropic substance use.

She also highlighted the importance of informing the general public about psychedelics and the use of psychedelics as a means to influence legislation. She outlined her plans for activism: music, performance arts, websites and other media etc. to shift the mainstream atmosphere and to educate people that psychedelic experiences are a lot more common than what the mainstream culture lets us believe. People should also be made aware that many business people and artists rely on such experiences many popular and well-known people use psychedelics.

**Claudia Mueller-Ebeling:** *Visionary Art, Ancestors, Spirits and Shamans*

In her work Claudia combines anthropology and art history. She spoke about her adventures in the world of shamanic artwork and imagery and especially her study of the meanings of these images.

She claimed that shamans of different cultures and origins can read the same images as if they were open books. To demonstrate her claim she used an example of Shipibo artwork, which to the western eye looked like an abstract ornament, and argued that besides being a graphic system it was also the notation system for a song. When she asked a Nepalese shaman about the graphic, the shaman said that it depicted the journey of a shaman to the highest peak of the upper world. This was confirmed by the shaman who did the drawing. At a different occasion she witnessed how ayahuasqueros of the Amazon had visions of Ganesha and Siva when taking ayahuasca in Nepal. While Nepalese artwork is clearly different from the figurative art of the Shipibo, these two cultures can understand each other's art.

**Arno Adelaars:** *The infinite variety of Ayahuasca Ritual Styles*

Arno talked about how all styles of ayahuasca rituals, regardless of their location, can be traced back to the shamanic ceremonies in the Amazon region. The vastness of the region, the diversity of the indigenous cultures and the liberty of shamans to practice their medicine resulted in a variety of individual styles even within one tribal community.

He gave the example of a tribe, where within one family an elderly shaman leads the ceremonies with hardly any rules, whereas his disciple, who happens to be his nephew, imposes many rigid rules in his ceremony. There is also much diversity in what is seen as the 'correct' way to sing the icaros during a ceremony: in some traditions the ayahuasquero sings only one icaro whereas in another the more icaros the ayahuasquero sings the better he is.

The expression of individual styles can also be seen in modern day rituals. Even the existence of ayahuasca dogmatism, as can be observed in for example the Brazilian Santo Daime rituals and the Peruvian Vegetalista ceremonies, is an expression of the infinite variety of styles.

**Christian Rättsch:** *The seven pillars of Ayahuasca*

Christian started his presentation by talking about how different the shamanic worldview is to that of the academic worldview of our days and how this can lead to difficulties in understanding what shamans are saying.

The ayahuasca vine for example, the anaconda and the river Amazon are regarded as one and the same entity for some shamans of the region. The ayahuasca vine is the same as the mythical anaconda that carried the first ancestors from outer space to Mother Earth. The tributaries of the Amazon such as the Marañon, Ucuyali, Putumayo, Rio Negro etc represent the different types of plants that belong to the cultural realm of ayahuasca: la pinta (the visionary plants), yopo (plants that produce enhanced language capabilities), coca, tobacco (enhances ayahuasca states, used for healing during the ceremonies), copal (incenses) and los remedios (healing plants). These are all like the

smaller rivers that flow into the Amazon. These additional plants are usually added to the ayahuasca brew to colour the visions. To fully understand them we have to shift our minds to the native perspective, which requires a lot of respect from us.

### **Ede Frecska: *Ayahuasca and creativity***

Ede presented a recent study of his about the effects of ayahuasca on creativity. The effect of psychedelics on the expression of creativity is a controversial issue, debated or ignored in professional literature, and echoed with an emotional tone within the public media.

In order to study the psychometric measures of creativity after a series of ayahuasca administration, forty individuals, who were self-motivated participants of ayahuasca rituals in Brazil were investigated before and two days after a two-week long ceremony series.

The study supports the notion that some measures of visual creativity (especially originality) may increase after ayahuasca use, when the acute effects of ayahuasca have receded. It also demonstrates increased entoptic activity after repeated ayahuasca ingestion.

More information of the presentations can be found on the website of the Stichting OPEN:  
<http://www.stichtingopen.nl/en/announcement>.

### ***Hungarian Multidisciplinary Society for Psychedelic Studies and its proposed research ideas***

The Hungarian Multidisciplinary Society for Psychedelic Studies was founded at the beginning of 2011 with the aim to re-initiate psychedelic research in Hungary and to educate Hungarian mental health professionals about psychedelics. Its public debut occurred in the form of the First Hungarian Psychedelic Forum: Psychedelics in the Culture and Healing of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a professional conference held in Budapest in March 2011 (<http://www.pszichedelikumok.hu/site/iras/20110123/pszichedelikumok-21-szazad-terapiajaban-es-kulturajaban-az-mtpk>).

One aim of the workgroup in Amsterdam was to introduce the Society to their European researcher counterparts and to harmonize its future plans with what is seen to be the important next steps of ayahuasca research by the experts of the field.

After a short introduction of the Society, Dr. Ede Frecska presented the research ideas of the organization. The aim was to gather reflections to these ideas at an early stage as well as to capitalize on the culminated experience of those present in order to avoid the perils of permitting and conducting research in this challenging area.

**Below is an outline of the discussion of these initiatives and the workgroup's respective reflections:**

#### **Possible research directions:**

1. Investigation of the effects of ayahuasca rituals on Alcoholics Anonymous participants attending psychotherapy
  - An obstacle here is to overcome the prejudice of AA members that ayahuasca is a drug. Special sensitization and education would be needed.

2. Investigation of the effects of ayahuasca on PTSD patients. Prior research findings and traditional use suggest that ayahuasca allows the reliving of repressed trauma without the subjects becoming re-traumatized.
3. Investigation of the effects of ayahuasca on patients with panic disorder. The underlying hypothesis is that ayahuasca experiences have the potential to help patients with panic disorder to learn to deal with ego dissolution, which may lie at the root of panic attacks. In a safe environment ayahuasca rituals may offer a chance for such patients to overcome their panic attacks.
  - Clinical studies are in general problematic, because of the high financial burdens set by the quality insurance needed for the brew.

#### **Methodological debate:**

4. An observational field study will likely be an easier design to obtain regulatory permission for than a clinical trial. What is in this case needed for the PTSD study is to locate people who already use ayahuasca in ritual setting and have indication of prior trauma in their lives (sexual abuse victims, car accident victims, war trauma patients etc). A follow up of their wellbeing after the rituals as well as how stable the hypothesized improvements are could be investigated.
  - The arising difficulties are related to ethical issues and the recruiting of participants.
  - Ensuring the homogeneity/comparability of participants is also an issue.
5. Another idea for a field study was to use various psychometric scales to compare ritual ayahuasca users with other drug users (e.g., marihuana) recruited through online drug forums.
  - A critique of the idea was that ayahuasca should be compared to placebo instead of another drug, which may raise negative associations.
  - If determining a suitable comparison group is problematic, a 1 year longitudinal study without a comparison group could be done instead of a cross-sectional comparison.
  - The question of confounding factors and suitable controls is a difficult one in a field study. What may these confounders be? (e.g., personality traits, different settings of substance use, the use of non-standardized ayahuasca brews, etc.)
  - The personalities and styles of different ayahuasca ceremony leaders may also influence the outcomes.
6. Replication of preceding research such as that of Jordi Riba and his team, or MAPS Canada. The replication of an observational study may be of use as well as suitable to the Hungarian circumstances.
  - The Brazilian ayahuasca religions in Europe may be worth contacting to facilitate research in the EU as they provide a fairly stable population of potential study volunteers from a standardized environment. The drawback of recruiting from the religions is that the results may not be generalizable to non-religious, ritualistic use.

#### ***Further questions raised in free discussion***

1. Different forms of ayahuasca use and ayahuasca rituals in Europe. Ayahuasca rituals are constantly spreading in Europe, resulting in a continuous need for update in the following questions:
  - How might ayahuasca use be different here from that in South America?
  - Is the European use for healing, religious use, or recreation?
2. Wouldn't the use of DMT instead of ayahuasca be a better choice for the scientific studies? DMT would allow for a much more controlled study.
  - The problem is that to synthesize DMT is very expensive. Research with DMT has recently been carried out in Germany, but even there the relevant costs were high,

not to mention the price liability insurance for conducting such studies with human subjects.

3. In case of conducting field studies how would one know what substance is actually used in the different ceremonial settings? The actual ingredients of ayahuasca may vary even in one country let alone in a Europe-wide study. Controlling such a study is also a challenge. Focusing on the syncretic churches present in the EU may be a way around this difficulty.
  - Caution is needed to avoid the charlatans present in Europe. It is known for example that some people in Austria advertise ayahuasca rituals but give their participants a brew made only from *B. caapi* (it does not contain DMT).

### ***What would be the best way to get ayahuasca research acknowledged by mainstream professionals?***

### ***What is the next most important step in ayahuasca research?***

Near the end of the workgroup all participants stated their ideas about what the most important next steps of ayahuasca research are in order to widen our knowledge base and make the mainstream scientific community aware of ayahuasca in an acknowledgeable way.

- A study researching plant additives to the regular ayahuasca brew is of high importance. Each additive and the possible special reasons for their use should be studied. About a 100 additives call for pharmacological, ethnographic and phenomenological studies.
- The cognitive functions affected by ayahuasca need to be revealed. In-depth interviews should be carried out with western people from a cognitive ethnographic approach.
- Studying the experiences of the ceremony leaders, techniques of integration and their own spiritual growth may reveal many important aspects of ayahuasca.
- Qualitative studies are needed to get a more detailed picture of what participants find important in the 'outcomes' of ayahuasca ceremonies.
  - Qualitative studies on their own are not enough. At least mixed methodologies are needed to be acknowledged by the mainstream scientific community.
  - We should be aware that just asking participants questions about their experiences may itself facilitate the integration of the experience, thereby affecting the outcomes we may be seeking to measure.
- Despite the increasing number of students and other up-coming researchers interested in studying ayahuasca, there is a lack of established academics and mentors active in this field. Colleagues such as professors and well-respected investigators should be invited to collaborate or encouraged to start their own research in this area.
- For every study the aim should be to target the highest quality journals so that the mainstream slowly learns to take ayahuasca research seriously.
- Classical clinical trials with the use of the golden standards of clinical work such as randomization, double blind, placebo-control, cross-over studies utilizing standardized outcomes assessments need to be applied where possible. The more we approach these standards the better chances are to become acknowledged.
- Cooperating with the WHO is a possible next step. At present, the WHO taken no official stance on ayahuasca and likely knows very little about the brew. Conscious efforts should be made to be approachable by such institutions as a reliable expert group for consultancy.

### ***Debate on activism***

At the end of the workgroup a debate emerged about the possible role of activism in making ayahuasca acknowledged. One standpoint was of those who prefer to abide by pure academic work and distance themselves from activism, and the other was of those who believe researchers need to carry out activist activities to promote substantial awareness and acknowledgement. It was agreed that there is a need for both types of professionals in a field as controversial as ayahuasca research

### ***Reflections of the Hungarian Multidisciplinary Society for Psychedelic Studies on the Symposium***

We believe that the event was overall successful, especially when considering the limited resources that were available to the organizers to produce this event.

One of the highlights from the symposium was the fact that so many professionals devoted to the study of ayahuasca turned up regardless of the short time frame within which the symposium was organized. Since there had been no official event before to gather the European ayahuasca researchers in a targeted way, the fact that these people could meet and get acquainted was in itself of great value. There were other researchers in Europe whose participation we would have much appreciated, such as the team of Jordi Riba in Barcelona, but unfortunately for scheduling reasons were unable to attend. We look forward to collaborating with these colleagues in future events.

One of the aims of the Society is to formulate a clear set of priorities for ayahuasca research in general and to come to an agreement on the desired direction that this research will take in Hungary, which already in the 1970s contributed greatly to the scientific study of DMT under the auspices of investigators like Dr. Stephen Szára. We are still in the process of outlining these research priorities, a task that was greatly helped by hearing the diverse perspectives and suggestions of the participants of the workgroup. Certainly, important contacts were made both with our fellow researchers and, through them, we learned how better to contact and recruit study volunteers who are participating in ayahuasca ceremonies in Europe—a great help to getting future observational field studies off the ground.

Many valuable ideas were collected at the workgroup and the Hungarian Society will not have the capacity to follow-up on all of them in the immediate future. Therefore this document should serve as a collection of ideas, experience and reflections to any researcher interested in the field of ayahuasca research.

Thank you to all the participants of the Symposium, and a special thanks to MAPS, Stichting OPEN, Bia Labate, and Brian Anderson for the tremendous amount of effort and support they put into organizing the Symposium and the workgroup!

Ede Frecska, Petra Bokor and David Bartha  
Hungarian Multidisciplinary Society for Psychedelic Studies